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ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

Miss Vera Brittain

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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
MISS VERA BRITTAIN

RECORDED ON JULY 24, 1967
IN LONDON

B.R. Nanda: Miss Brittain, when did you meet Mr. Nehru for the first time?

Vera Brittain: In 1936 when he came to tea at our home in Chelsea.

B.R. Nanda: Could you tell us something about that visit; how he impressed you? What did he talk about?

Vera Brittain: He impressed me very much. He was then a very young looking man and it was his look of youth that impressed me. But of course, that was forgotten when he started to talk and he told us, (he was on his way, I think to see his wife who was dying and so he was looking very melancholy and sad but he did not allow that to interfere with what he said). He told us a little bit about his imprisonments and he spoke about his hopes for India and what he intended to do. It wasn't a very long conversation because we were having tea. This was arranged (I should have started with that) by Lord Lothian who was then one of our representatives in the Government. I forget what exactly he was. And he arranged it, so that Mr. Nehru could meet some of the younger members of the Labour Party, to which we all belonged to. And we had Hugh Gaitskell there and I think Arthur Creech Jones;
.... Evan Durbin was another. Anyhow, the younger people who were prominent in the Labour Party at that time

and they were being introduced to him and he was talking to them. So, I didn't get a kind of unbroken conversation with him.

B.R. Nanda: You said, he was rather sad because his wife was very ill, I know she was dying.

Vera Brittain: We did not realise that, but she died soon afterwards.

B.R. Nanda: He had found it very difficult to come to London. He was being pressed to come here, but she was not very well. In one of those spells when she improved.....

Vera Brittain: Was she imprisoned?

B.R. Nanda: What I meant was that he had been in jail, I think, for two years or more. Then they released him so that he could go to Switzerland to see her. He stayed with her for sometime. She was getting worse and worse. Then she improved for a short-time, for a few days, and he took the opportunity of coming here. And then he went back, she grew worse and unfortunately she died. Did you notice any bitterness in him against the British?

Vera Brittain: No bitterness at all. It would not be very rightly expressed to us because we were all opponents of the Government policy.

B.R. Nanda: Yes, quite right. Lord Lothian was present or not?

Vera Brittain: No. He was not present. He

arranged it.

B.R. Nanda: That first visit and first conversation with Mr. Nehru, it had an impact on you for the future.

Vera Brittain: Oh, very much. It made me very interested in him and very determined to meet and see what I could of him.

B.R. Nanda: From what I can see now, Professor Catlin after that, and you yourself, interested yourself in promoting the Indian cause here in London.

Vera Brittain: It wasn't only because of Mr. Nehru. I must say we always had it.

B.R. Nanda: But I said, you felt stimulated to do it?

Vera Brittain: Yes, we felt stimulated. We got encouraged, because it was worth-while.

B.R. Nanda: About that time, his book came out, the Autobiography, in 1936.

Vera Brittain: Yes, there was a lot about it in the Press at the time. I remember, I read a review of it in the New Statesman.

B.R. Nanda: How did the book impress you?

Vera Brittain: Oh, I was fascinated by it. I

did not read it at that time. I read it later when I was writing one of my books on India, but I thought it was a wonderful book.

B.R. Nanda: It went into ten printings.

Vera Brittain: I think, it went into two or three here in this country;

B.R. Nanda: Ten printings in 1936, I think. That is very unusual.

Vera Brittain: Very unusual. I was surprised to hear that it was as much as that number. Of course, he was very well-known here. We had all admired him very much for what he had been doing, specially those of us who were working for India's freedom.

B.R. Nanda: Now, who were the other people who were of great help to you at that time working for India?

Vera Brittain: Well, we were associated with the whole group that centred round Fenner Brockway. He was one of the chief people and many members of the Labour Party at that time were concerned with freedom for India. Lord Lothian was one. Because he was on the Government and so, he could not be as forthcoming as some of the rest of us.

B.R. Nanda: Krishna Menon's group, India League,

were they cooperating with you?

Vera Brittain: Well, I don't remember, ever having very much to do with Krishna Menon. We were in rather a different group.

B.R. Nanda: And Sir Stafford Cripps, you were in contact with him at that time?

Vera Brittain: Yes, I was for some time. I can't remember whether he was in the Government then or not.

B.R. Nanda: He came into the Government after the War.

Vera Brittain: Yes, that is right. He was still quite young at that time (Stafford Cripps).But he was very well-known as he was a member of Parliament. Arthur Creech Jones, of course, was closely associated with us in working for India.

B.R. Nanda: What about Kingsley Martin?

Vera Brittain: Yes, Martin was more associated with Krishna Menon than he was with us.

B.R. Nanda: Which were the papers which were supporting us here at that time?

Vera Brittain: The chief papers were the Manchester Guardian and the New Statesman, Daily News; the liberal press on the whole, and I think, as far as I remember the Daily Herald was supporting us. But it was not a very important paper.

B.R. Nanda: Did you feel at that time that Indian independence was far away or was it close at hand? What were your feelings in the thirties?

Vera Brittain: My personal feeling was that it was rather a long way away.

B.R. Nanda: You would have given the British Raj say, another fifty years?

Vera Brittain: Oh, no, not as much as that, but perhaps twenty.

B.R. Nanda: You know, we had a very able man, Sir S.P. Sinha who became Lord Sinha. He became Under-Secretary of State in 1919.

Vera Brittain: Yes, I remember hearing him spoken of.

B.R. Nanda: And he was the first Indian to be appointed a Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. He thought before the First World War, it would take 400 years before the British would go.

Vera Brittain: Did he really?

B.R. Nanda: Yes, and I was just trying to see how things looked to you. I mean you were so sympathetic and you were so eager for Indian Independence.

Vera Brittain: I am trying to remember when the

Attlee Government came into power; wasn't it 1945?

B.R. Nanda: Yes, the Attlee Government came into power in 1945?

Vera Brittain: Because as soon as Attlee Government came into power, of course, things started moving and we knew they would, because we knew his views on it.

B.R. Nanda: Did you have a talk with Mr. Attlee at anytime on this subject?

Vera Brittain: Oh yes, I have often since, but I don't think before he became Prime Minister.

B.R. Nanda: Did you meet him during the years when he was not Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party?

Vera Brittain: Oh yes, we knew him.

B.R. Nanda: Did you talk about India then?

Vera Brittain: I don't remember any particular incident. He did not come to this tea party (for Nehru). He was rather the leader of the Labour Party. He was rather high up for us at that time. We had seen a lot of him since he became Prime Minister.

B.R. Nanda: In 1945 and 1946, it became obvious that India was going to be independent.

Vera Brittain: Yes, once the Labour Party was in

power, it seemed that independence was going to be fairly near. I don't think we thought it would come as quickly as it did.

B.R. Nanda: Both you and Professor Catlin were at that stage very close to us in many ways.

Vera Brittain: Oh yes, we have been very close to India for many years. It started with our friendship with Agatha Harrison and she, of course, was a great protagonist for freedom for India.

B.R. Nanda: Could you tell us something about her, I would like to hear it from you as a friend.

Vera Brittain: She was a Quaker as you know and very self-possessed; not a person who would dramatise things at all, but I had a great admiration for her; she was like a rock.

B.R. Nanda: She was a very determined person, very shrewd and reliable.

Vera Brittain: Very shrewd and very knowledgeable. She knew a great deal. You know there is a large dump of her papers in Friends' House. Both her sisters have now died; they are probably dead. The younger sister was incharge of them. She told me these were in the Friends' House.

B.R. Nanda: I am very anxious to acquire them for the Nehru Museum and Library.

Vera Brittain: I wish you could. But they probably

are not very much sorted.

B.R. Nanda: That job I can do, I have staff and I have the facilities. How do I acquire them?

Vera Brittain: Just go and see the Librarian at Friends' House.

B.R. Nanda: I am seeing Mr. Horace Alexander. He may be able to assist.

Vera Brittain: He might but I can't remember now who the Librarian at Friends' House is because they change so quickly. If you tell him that I had a lot to do with the collection of these papers that I was in Agatha Harrison's confidence and I had the confidence of her sister, who was also very keen on India. I think, they would not listen to you for your own sake, but I think they would help.

B.R. Nanda: I am very keen to acquire these papers and to save them.

Vera Brittain: I think, Agatha would be pleased in heaven. Various people have worked on them but they never got very far with them.

B.R. Nanda: I am afraid when papers are dis-arranged, not properly catalogued and preserved they can also suffer in the process.

Vera Brittain: Friends' House would do their best to look after them but they haven't a very large staff.

B.R. Nanda: I have an Archives department which looks after only private papers and correspondence. Now I have all the papers of the Indian National Congress since its inception. I have got the Nehru papers.

Vera Brittain: Exactly that is what had been wanted all these years, all these papers are being dispersed.

B.R. Nanda: And I am acquiring these papers of many distinguished Indians who have died, or who are alive and are prepared to hand over papers to us for safe custody.

Vera Brittain: I am sure, you will be in a position to get the papers at the Friends' House.

B.R. Nanda: Could you speak to some one during my visit here?

Vera Brittain: Yes, I will ring up the Librarian and could say that you want to see him.

B.R. Nanda: Could you speak to him day-after tomorrow? I am here throughout this week and may be next week also.

Vera Brittain: Yes, I will certainly do that.

B.R. Nanda: Could you tell us about that interview with Mr. Nehru, the exclusive one, when Professor Catlin was not present? You were doing an article for a Magazine, you said.

Vera Brittain: The World Conference of Pacifists was on and he visited us when we were in session in Sevagram

and he spoke to us and gave his talk, then I said, 'Can I use this in an article'. He said, "Certainly, you say anything you like". But it wasn't what may be called a private interview.

B.R. Nanda: It was an interview on a very important subject. Do you recall it briefly?

Vera Brittain: Yes, I do remember him saying to me and to other people there and particularly to me, he said, 'This is a very important matter and you are working on a very important thing but you are only one group of good people. You must not think that you can move the world". He knew we were a voluntary conference. I wish you could see Horace Alexander about all this.

B.R. Nanda: I have met him before. I was going to see him.

Vera Brittain: He is very old now but he remembers all about it quite clearly. Ask him about Nehru's visit to Sewagram.

B.R. Nanda: And how did this Pacifist Conference go?

Vera Brittain: It was like most Pacifist Conferences. They were talking but came to no particular conclusions. But there were people who worked on India, in relation to India after they came home.

B.R. Nanda: Did you meet Gandhiji at any time?

Vera Brittain: Only when he came to England and

I did not meet him personally. He came here for the second Round Table Conference. I went to a lunch at which he spoke. But I can't say I met him in the sense that my husband met him.

B.R. Nanda: What impression did he make on you, even from a distance as a young pro-Indian?

Vera Brittain: He made a great impression upon me. I could not expect him to be handsome like a film-star. I knew he wouldn't be like that. But as soon as he started to speak, one forgot all about his appearance, his peculiar clothes and all the rest of it. All you wanted was to hear what he had to say. There was a real power in the room.

B.R. Nanda: It was not the eloquence of the usual type.

Vera Brittain: It was not eloquence but it was a deep, deep conviction and intention.

B.R. Nanda: And something in the atmosphere seemed to impress you?

Vera Brittain: Something in the atmosphere which began to change as soon as he began to speak. It was the power of the spirit, as you might call it.

B.R. Nanda: And how did you find talking to Mr. Nehru, a very pleasant experience?

Vera Brittain: It was more pleasant when he was a youngman here, as our guest, than later. He became a

little frightening, a little later, when he got older or as he got more important, perhaps.

B.R. Nanda: Did he seem to be preoccupied?

Vera Brittain: No, I think, perhaps the feeling may be in one's own mind rather, the question of the position he had.

B.R. Nanda: Because he was Prime Minister. Any personal recollection you may have of Mr. Nehru, anything you found very human about him or anything that might have amused you, left a deep impression on you, a personal gesture or touch and so on?

Vera Brittain: He always made a great impression on me. I am just trying to think what particular one I should record.

I think, I felt that he was a modest man who succeeded in being impressive at the same time. He did not throw his weight about; he did not try to dominate but he was very impressive. My husband and I saw him together in Delhi, in 1963; that was the last time we saw him. But I think the biggest impression he made on me was at that time when he came to our tea party and he was a youngman, who was able to talk off the record. He had just been in prison in 1936.

B.R. Nanda: He seemed youthful and hopeful?

Vera Brittain: Well, not so hopeful. because he was feeling depressed about his wife, and independence

was a long way off.

B.R. Nanda: But he was determined to fight his way. That is what I suppose, impressed you most.

Vera Brittain: Yes, that is what impressed his determination and his courage. I never saw him later right till the end, very late in his life. We saw him in 1963 but not when he came to London, I am not sure, if we had any private conversation. I don't think we had very much private conversation. Well, I think the two times he impressed me most were the times he came to our home at the tea party in Chelsea. It was not here, I have to keep remembering all the time that this is a different house. And the time when I was in Sewagram he said, "You are all such good people, but we must not expect you to move the world".

B.R. Nanda: You thought that it gave a practical edge to what you were doing?

Vera Brittain: Yes, I think we did better in that conference than he expected us to.

B.R. Nanda: That also I think shows his attitude to pacifism as Professor Catlin was telling me. It was different from that of Gandhi's.

Vera Brittain: He never pretended about that. He said, you are a group of good people meaning you have a lot of damnfool ideas (Laughter)

B.R. Nanda: I am afraid not, because in his books he does not rule pacifism out of hand. He feels that

from pacifism it would have to be a hard road up hill.

Vera Brittain: I think he had an agonising feeling of pacifism all the time because he knew Gandhi wanted him to agree with him, but, of course, he did not.

B.R. Nanda: Thank you very much but if you could spare the time I would go on. This is an important matter. We were discussing, Professor Catlin and myself were talking about Gandhi's pacifism and I feel Gandhi did not press even Mr. Nehru beyond a certain point.

Vera Brittain: I am sure, that is true.

B.R. Nanda: Because Nehru and his father were in favour of the Indian army being retained after independence, if Gandhiji had ever come into office, (of course, he would never have accepted office,) he would have disbanded the army and the police. He said there is no use for the police either. That kind of philosophic anarchism would not go.

Vera Brittain: It would have been a wonderful society with no police and no army.

B.R. Nanda: It would be practised in a small compact area. It is not for bigger countries.

Vera Brittain: I am sure, not. India is too big a country for that; there may be too many problems.

B.R. Nanda: It would have been impossible to be practised in a subcontinent.

B.R. Nanda: You have known Mrs. Pandit very well?

Vera Brittain: Oh yes. pretty well.

B.R. Nanda: Well, you were her biographer.

Vera Brittain: I have seen a great deal of her and I stayed with her.

B.R. Nanda: And did you meet the Nehru family in their New Delhi house or Allahabad house, I mean, Mr. Nehru, his daughter, his sister all together?

Vera Brittain: We met in Delhi but we never got to know her very well. She took the chair for me in one of the meetings I had in 1953 and she spoke very kindly.

B.R. Nanda: When Mr. Nehru came for the Commonwealth Conferences, he used to come every year, did you meet him?

Vera Brittain: I know that, we usually went to the garden party in the India House. It would not have been possible to see anybody personally in those conferences.

B.R. Nanda: From what I could see, his decision for India to remain in the Commonwealth was not such a surprise as people made it out to be.

Vera Brittain: Krishna Menon advised him, didn't he, about that?

Vera Brittain: No, it was not surprising. Well, Mrs. Pandit was High Commissioner here at the time of Suez crisis. She was very determined all along that India must stay in the Commonwealth.

Professor Catlin: Professor Catlin, husband of Vera Brittain, was present at the interview. Mr. Nehru was a Brahmin and a Westerner; Mr. Gandhi was not a Brahmin and he was a man of religion.

Vera Brittain: Well, there were complicated relationships, but considering how complicated they were, I think the total influence was very remarkable.

Professor Catlin: As to Krishna Menon, he was a Westerner turned full circle. He found his happier home in places north of the Himalayas.

Vera Brittain: Well, is he out of India now? He was here the other day. You were asking me about the India League. The India League worked with and around Krishna Menon.

Professor Catlin: I was a member of the I.L. Executive, I think, some Mr. Russel at that time was the President or Chairman. Mr. Sorenson was active, Menon emphatically was the Secretary of the Organisation. Organisations, in my experience, come under two or three headings: those that are ruled by the Chairman, those that are ruled by their Secretary and those that are ruled by democratic Committees. India League was ruled by its Secretary.

Vera Brittain: I never had any particular liking for Menon and so failed to work for him. (To Professor Catlin) Would you remind me, I forget things, that I have promised to ring up Friends' House about Agatha Harrison's Collection of papers which Mr. Nanda wants for India? and I think that would be wonderful place for them. Don't you? I don't think, Friends, House will sit on them with full reverence. I don't think it would ever publish them.

Professor Catlin: What happened to Laski Institute? I think, it is in Hyderabad.

B.R. Nanda: That is in Ahmedabad and it is named after Laski.

Professor Catlin: Is it still.......?

B.R. Nanda: Well, I have not seen the place. Once I went to Ahmedabad and missed the man. He is the son of Mavlankar, the Speaker of the Assembly; Mr. Mavlankar, he is running it.

Vera Brittain: Well, I shall be very happy if the papers go to you.

Professor Catlin: One other point, I would like in this interview to mention, not directly relevant to Mr. Nehru but most directly relevant to Mahatma Gandhi. That is a Memorial. We attended a India House meeting on the matter and the programme was put forward. I suggested that one shape at least that the Memorial should take (and I had a letter from the relevant Secretary) would be an Institute for conflict and peace and prevention of war research. Such an Institute exists under the direction of the Myrdals in Sweden and ~~are~~ is supported by the Swedish Government. Similar Institutes ~~too~~ exist in Philadelphia, Toronto and elsewhere. But nowhere would it be more appropriate than in India, and no more appropriate a memorial to Gandhi, possibly with the direct support of the India Government.

Vera Brittain: You know. we have a statue of Mr. Gandhi now.